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SUBJECT Robert Gates' Confirmation Hearings

DAN RATHER: President Reagan turned aside reporters' questions again today and his Central America policy took some direct hits from the Congress. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to cut off aid to Nicaraguan Contras, and other committees had sharp questions about the Iran arms scandal, the role of the CIA, and Mr. Reagan's new choice to be CIA Director.

Phil Jones reports.

PHIL JONES: At the Senate Foreign Relations Committee today, Democrats made a fresh assault on continuing aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, voting to cut off \$40 million in military assistance to the Contras.

SENATOR ALAN CRANSTON: The Contra effort, rather obviously, has poisoned our national government and weakened the Administration because of the zealotry with which some within that Administration have pursued the Contra war.

JONES: But it was a narrow 11-to-9 vote, with opponents admitting they still don't have the votes to override a certain presidential veto.

At another hearing, the Director of the General Accounting Office, Charles Bowsher, disclosed that the GAO has found at least \$80,000 in designated humanitarian aid actually went for weapons. Bowsher also complained about the CIA refusing to allow the GAO to audit covert accounts.

And at the confirmation hearing of Robert Gates to be CIA Director today, he was able to joke with photographers in obvious reference to the tough questioning he has undergone.

ROBERT GATES: Remember that Country and Western song, "Take This Job and Shove It"?

JONES: Gates was anxious to defuse the confrontation with GAO over accounting of covert funds.

GATES: We are prepared to pursue with the committee any additional arrangements that it might wish to develop.

JONES: The 43-year-old CIA Director-nominee modified his statement of yesterday, when he indicated that he would not tell the committee if he saw illegal activities by the NSC.

GATES: And I would consider it my obligation to report to the Intelligence Committees any illegal intelligence activity by any agency.

JONES: In earlier secret testimony, Gates said that he had not told any of his superiors that the Iran policy was bad and should be changed. Today he changed his story, saying he did tell then-CIA Director Casey on one occasion the whole idea was wrong.

On the subject of secret presidential findings for covert activities, Gates had a promise.

GATES: Well, the first thing I would do would be to hop in a car and come up here.

[Laughter]

SENATOR BILL BRADLEY: Well, you're learning, Mr. Gates.

[Laughter]

GATES: Nobody ever accused me of being slow, Senator.

JONES: Unless Gates is linked further to the Iran-Contra operation, he is expected to be confirmed as CIA Director.